

Nathan Steinberger dies at 94

A life dedicated to the fight against fascism and Stalinism

By Verena Nees
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On February 26 Nathan Steinberger died at the age of 94 in a hospital in Berlin. His wife Edith died four years ago. Nathan and Edith Steinberger were among the last members of a generation who lived through an epoch marked by revolutionary upheavals and the tragic defeats of the workers movement. Their lives were inextricably bound up with the terrible experiences of fascism and the Stalinist terror, during which, as members of the German Communist Party (KPD) living in the Soviet Union, they barely escaped with their lives. [See also: An interview with Nathan Steinberger (1997)]

Born in 1910, the youngest child in an Orthodox Jewish family in Berlin, Nathan grew up in relative poverty. His earliest impression of the world was defined by war and hunger and the subsequent revolutionary struggles of the Berlin workers. At the same time, he was also influenced by the cultural upswing of the 1920s. As a five year-old, he waited in queues to purchase opera and theatre tickets for his elder sister. His elder brother rehearsed at home with a Dada theatre group. Nathan himself earned pocket money working as an extra in different productions and was able to amaze friends and visitors, right up until his old age, with his knowledge of literature and painting.

When the First World War began Nathan was four years old; when the Russian Revolution occurred he was seven. At 90 years of age, asked about his childhood memories, Nathan recalled: “The Russian Revolution had Berlin in a whirl. Everyone was talking about Lenin and Trotsky. Looking back, I can say with certainty that the events in Russia had an enormous effect on life in Berlin and the whole of Germany.”

Some of the largest demonstration and street battles of the November Revolution of 1918 occurred in the immediate vicinity of the Steinberg family’s apartment. Nathan and his younger brother Leo often played with empty bullet shells, which they collected during the breaks in armed combat between supporters of the *Spartakusbund* (the revolutionary Spartacus League, later to become one of the essential components of the German Communist Party, led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht) and *Freikorps* soldiers (reactionary paramilitary organizations). Often, Nathan joined the mass demonstrations after school, and in the evenings he would run away from home to attend the heated political debates of workers in the KPD, USPD (Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany) and the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany), who held discussions in nearby meeting halls.

Under the influence of his elder brother Adolf, who was later murdered by the Nazis in the Mauthausen concentration camp, Nathan soon joined the communist movement. At the age of 14 he became a member of the Communist Youth Federation, and was involved in

building the *Kommunistische KoPeFra* (Communist High School Students Faction) and the Socialist School Student Federation (SSB), in which he played a leading role.

Nathan also got to know the problems of the German workers movement at a very early age, and experienced its attempt at emulating the Russian Revolution in Germany.

He looked back on the year of 1923 as being one of great hope and tension among both Communist and Social Democratic workers. There had been strikes throughout the year. “There was a tangible feeling in the air—everyone who was politically aware felt that soon it would happen!” he recalled. “All of us, the workers of Berlin and the youth, were awaiting the German October Revolution in a fever of anticipation. I sensed that very clearly at the time.” The disappointment was all the greater when the leadership of the German Communist Party hesitated so long that they missed the crest of the movement. “One day, I realized it was all over. Suddenly, there was a standstill. I couldn’t explain it, but all of sudden the excitement was gone, and disappointment spread. The workers who weren’t organised in the KPD were particularly disappointed. There was an oppressive silence for several days.”

In the wake of the struggles that emerged within the Russian Communist Party between Stalin’s faction and the Left Opposition led by Leon Trotsky, conflicts also broke out in the KPD after 1923. Although he was still too young to grasp the political issues, Nathan and his entire local were expelled from the Communist Youth Federation (KJVD) in 1926. The justification given for this was that the local was under the influence of Karl Korsch, a prominent critic of the party line.

Nathan Steinberger remained active in the SSB. He and his friends not only discussed politics, but also organised discussions with writers such as Erich Kästner, Arnold Zweig and others, as well as debates on issues of psychology and sexuality. After passing his college entry-level exams in 1929, Nathan first enrolled in the medicine faculty at university in the hope of being able to pursue his favourite subject, psychology, but then switched to political economy. He specialised in agricultural science, and studied under the famous scientist Karl Wittfogel, who at that time was a representative of the International Agriculture Institute in Moscow.

Despite his previous expulsion from the Communist Youth Federation, Nathan became a member of the KPD in 1928. That year marked the beginning of vehement disputes within the KPD on the subject of the “social fascism theory” advanced by Stalin and his followers. According to this theory, there was no difference between social democracy and fascism. The effect of this suicidal policy was to prevent any common struggle by Social Democrat and Communist

workers against the increasing influence of the fascists.

Nathan instinctively rejected this position. As he later recalled: “This ultra-leftist position was something for the politically ignorant. The vast majority of those who had gone through the revolutionary experiences of 1918 and 1923 rejected the equation of the SPD with the fascists. I, at any rate, never used the phrase ‘social fascism’ when doing street agitation.”

It was during this period that Nathan Steinberger first encountered the writings of Leon Trotsky, who called for a united workers front of KPD and SPD workers against the growing influence of the Nazis.

A short while later the life of Nathan Steinberger was to change dramatically. At the recommendation of Karl Wittfogel, he was appointed to the Moscow Agricultural Institute in 1932, even before he had finished his course of studies. He was accompanied by his girlfriend Edith, who was also an active member of the KPD. Their stay in Moscow was supposed to last for two years, but when Hitler came to power in 1933 there was no way the young couple could return to Germany. Not only were they known as members of the KPD, they were also Jewish.

Nathan and Edith were shattered by the defeat of the workers movement and the victory of fascism in Germany. At the same time they discovered that the Soviet Union under Stalin’s regime had nothing in common with the revolutionary optimism of the 1920s that had attracted both of them to politics. At the Agricultural Institute, older colleagues informed Nathan about the terrible and brutal events that had taken place in the rural districts during the course of forced collectivization. He met Old Bolsheviks such as Fritz Platten, a Swiss revolutionary and close collaborator of Lenin’s, and experienced how Platten and other old party members were increasingly isolated. At this point, Trotsky’s supporters had already been exiled or imprisoned. There was hardly any open political discussion at the party meetings Nathan attended. Party democracy was increasingly smothered by bureaucratism and intrigues.

In 1935, Nathan was awarded his doctor’s degree. His doctorate on “The Agricultural Politics of National Socialism” was published, but soon afterwards his scientific work was abruptly brought to an end. In the aftermath of Leningrad party secretary Kirov’s murder, the purges began. And not only known oppositionists, but also an increasing number of party members who had hitherto been loyal followers of Stalin fell into the clutches of the Stalinist secret police GPU. Nathan was dismissed from the Agricultural Institute in 1936 and at first tried to make ends meet for his family, which now included a daughter, Marianne, born in 1935, by giving German lessons.

After the first Moscow show trial, the wave of arrests also engulfed the German émigrés who had fled from the Nazis. Looking back, Nathan pointed out that “Stalin moved against anyone who could be a potential critic of his politics. And he knew that the defeat in Germany was above all the result of his politics.”

On the eve of May Day 1937 Nathan was arrested. His wife Edith met the same fate in 1941, at the beginning of the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Their six-year-old daughter was taken in by a Jewish family they had befriended.

The martyrdom that now began was to last until 1956. Nathan was first incarcerated in the notorious Butyrky prison, and then transported to Kolyma in Siberia. He was charged with “counterrevolutionary Trotskyist activity,” his “guilt” compounded, among other things, by his expulsion from the German Communist Youth Federation at the age of 15. His wife was deported to a labour camp in Kazakhstan, where she only just managed to survive.

In Butyrky prison, Nathan recognised that the arrests were not arbitrary. They were primarily aimed at the most devoted party members who had actively participated in the October Revolution. He shared his first prison cell with a son of the Left Oppositionist Zinoviev and with the Old Bolshevik and party historian Vladimir Ivanovich Nevsky, who had been involved in the military preparation of the 1917 revolution as a member of the Petrograd Revolutionary Committee and was minister of transport in the first workers government under Lenin. Only a few weeks after Nathan’s arrival at Butyrki, Nevsky was taken from his prison cell and shot.

Unlike almost all of their friends of that time, Nathan and Edith Steinberger somehow survived. Reunited with their daughter, they were allowed to return to (East) Berlin in 1956, but were subjected to absolute silence in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). They were not allowed to say a single word about the Stalinist prison camps. It was only after the collapse of the GDR and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union that Nathan Steinberger began to recount his experiences under Stalinist terror. Unlike many other survivors of the Gulags, he did not embrace right-wing politics, but remained faithful to the socialist ideals of his youth.

Nathan used every opportunity presented to him to explain that Stalinism could not be equated with socialism. On the occasion of his ninetieth birthday, which he celebrated with many friends and acquaintances, Nathan Steinberger summarized the conclusions he had drawn from his life with the following words: “I want to help young people understand what Stalinism was. Socialism must be rid once and for all of the refuse of falsification and suppression—must be cleansed once and for all of Stalinism. The regimes in the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence had nothing whatsoever to do with socialism.”

The last years were not easy for Nathan Steinberger. He lost his wife and more and more old acquaintances, including Max Kahane last year, an old school friend who he knew from the days of the Socialist School Student Federation. He was hardly able to write and his hardness of hearing made life difficult and lonesome for him. What he did retain however, along with his sense of humour and his lifelong friends, was the conviction that a new generation would draw the lessons of the 1930s and take up the struggle of his generation to fight for a better society.

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